

A seat of honor by Lake Toba

Sitting by the lakeshore and looking up into a clear blue sky, it was hard to imagine that here, amid such perfect quiet, Mother Nature had once blown a 60-mile wide gash into the Earth.

The eruption rocketed ash and gas 30 miles into the stratosphere, and a dust layer estimated to be 6 inches thick settled on India – even though the eruption happened here on the Indonesian island of Sumatra.

The statistics associated with the blast, which was three thousand times more powerful than that of Mount St. Helens by some estimates, are staggering on every level. But for the traveler the most important is this: The eruption laid the foundation for what today is the world's largest crater lake.

THE BEAUTY OF A PLACE LIES IN ITS PEOPLE, EVEN IF THEY CAN'T SING.

Seventy-four thousand years later, as I sat on the shore of Lake Toba listening to nothing louder than the clink of a spoon inside my coffee cup, I felt embraced by the volcanic walls around me. I looked out over the water and was animated by that peaceful, warm sense that comes when you feel that life is indeed good.

But it wasn't merely the physical landscape that put me in this irenic mood, it was the people.

It was the family who ran the only Internet cafe in town (three computers in their living room). It was the three sisters who operated a modest restaurant near my hotel (they loved to watch the Indonesian version of "Who Wants to be a Millionaire"). It was the neighbors who gathered by the jetty each evening to bathe (they brought shampoo and smiles, and they laughed often). And it was people like Rizal.

I met Rizal at the Bamboo Restaurant and Guesthouse, where I rented one of the establishment's two rooms for \$1 a night.

He was a Muslim, curious about the world beyond Sumatra, and sensitive to the needs of his guests. One morning at breakfast when he saw my bloodshot eyes – I had been woken before dawn by the enthusiastic singing of Indonesian youth next door – he served me not only coffee but two pillows. "Please take a nap here on the floor," he said. "I'm afraid today it is quieter than in your room."

Rizal's considerate nature was appreciated. But in looking back today, it is his bad voice I most fondly recall.

It happened at the end of a day in which I had rented a motorbike to explore other parts of the lake. Back at the guesthouse at 7:30 p.m., I slipped into the restaurant just as heavy rain began pummeling the tin roof. Because of the downpour, I would be the only guest the entire evening.

I ordered satay and rice, and when it was ready, Rizal set it atop my candlelit table and then asked if I would like music with the meal. "Of course," I said, thinking he would simply flip on a radio.

Instead he found a guitar, pulled up a seat across the table, and began to play Eric Clapton's "Tears in Heaven."

Had Rizal been doing this on the stage of "American Idol," the judges would have fallen out of their chairs. Rizal's voice was mediocre at best, and his English had been learned through listening to fuzzy Voice of America broadcasts on his shortwave radio. But it was precisely his voice's imperfection that allowed – to borrow a line from Leonard Cohen's song "Anthem" – the light to get in. ("There is a crack in everything/ That's how the light gets in.") Rizal's face strained with intensity as he took on the words he was singing.

For an hour he serenaded me with Western and Indonesian tunes. After I finished eating, he asked if he could play a final song, this one by Green Day. "Of course," I said again. When he reached the refrain – "I hope you've had the time of your life" – he looked up from his guitar, his eyes bursting with sincerity, and sang it directly to me.

As the candlelight threw a soft shine onto Rizal's Sumatran features and our eyes met, I felt that his wish, made through song, was one of the most profound blessings I'd ever received. It was the wish of a Sumatran to an American, a 24-year-old to a 30-year-old, a Muslim to a Christian, and it brought to light the bonds that are possible between human beings.

I suspect Lake Toba will never be a destination for those who crave perfect restaurants, guesthouses, and music. Nor will it draw those who wish to explore the rumblings of an active volcano, since those days are long past. But through the quiet power of its landscape and people, Lake Toba will continue to draw those interested in being shaped by life's simpler gifts – even, perhaps, by the beauty of a bad voice.

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